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ABSTRACT

Recognizing that civic education is the school subject specifically dedicated to preparing students for democractic citizenship and that the school and classroom often have a less than democratic and value-loaded "political culture," this paper emphasizes the fundamental goals of civic education and then arrives at the ingredients of political culture in the school and classroom that are favorable to preparing students for democratic citizenship. The three fundamental goals of civic education are: (1) helping students become self-confident, well informed citizens who are able to think rationally and who are committed to the values of human dignity and human rights; (2) fostering a willingness and capacity to participate in political affairs on local, national, and international levels; and (3) developing a strong recognition of the need to balance individualism and self-interest with human interdependence and social as well as environmental responsibility. To effectively prepare students for democratic citizenship, individual classrooms and schools, teachers and administrators must model democratic citizenship for and with their students in the classroom and school climate in terms of how all members of the school community communicate; by avoiding indoctrination at all levels; and through the types of learning and teaching methods used. (CB)

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Political Culture in the School and Classroom: Preparation for Democratic Citizenship

by Peter Schuetz

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Political culture in the school and classroom:
Preparation for Democratic Citizenship
by Peter Schuetz

Ladies and gentlemen: I would like to start my presentation by apologizing not only for my poor English but also for putting a question mark behind the topic I'm talking about. I guess it should be: Political culture in the school and classroom: Preparation for Democratic Citizenship?

It seems to be necessary to add a question mark simply to indicate that we are dealing with problems rather than stating a fact. I understand that the term political culture - at least in academic discussion - implies value-loaded as well as value-neutral connotations. Education,however, cannot be value-neutral.
If we can agree on this we consequently have to recognize that political culture in the school and classroom as a means of preparation for democratic citizenship cannot be value-neutral either. It should rather be seen as a function of predominating educational goals in general and those of civic education in particular. It is the latter I would like to concentrate on.That may be justified by the fact that civic education is the school subject which is specifically dedicated to prepare students for democratic citizenship.

Let me therefore make a few remarks on the fundamental goals of civic education first. Only then are we in a position of telling which ingredients of political culture in the school and classroom may be seen as favourable to preparing students for democratic citizenship.

Fundamental goals of civic education

Needless to say there is no generally accepted set of goals for civic education neither within a nation nor between different nations- at least not in democratic societies. Nevertheless there is a broad agreement that civic education in democratic societies must be rooted in those fundamental democratic beliefs like human dignity and indivisible human rights.

I would like to focus on three goals of civic education that may be looked upon as being essential. Civic education should

(a) help students to become self-confident, well informed citizens who are able to think rationally and who are committed to the values of human dignity and human rights

(b) try to foster the willingness and capacity to participate in political affairs on all levels: local, national and international

(c) try to develop a strong recognition of the need to balance individualism and self-interest with human interdependence and social as well as environmental responsibility

Civic education dedicated to these goals implies the development of knowledge, skills and values.

Let me add one remark: When enumerating the three main goals of civic education I conaciously chose the terms „help students to, try to foster and try to develop".This is to indicate that educational efforts can never be more than „showing the way". We cannot produce good citizens but we can help young people to lead responsible lives as democratic citizens in free democratic societies.

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Political culture in the school and classroom

These remarks may provide the background leading to the question whether political culture in the school and classroom can be a preparation for democratic citizenship. Or to put it more accurately: What sort of political culture in the school and classroom can be expected to be supportive in terms of democratic citizenship.

There is no straightforward answer. If we can agree on the fundamental goals of civic education as outlined above, political culture in our context may be described like this: It is the set of those predominant values, attitudes and ways of interaction including formal and informal rules which characterize school and classroom life and which are favourable for reaching those goals.

Thus, political culture in the school and classroom may be identified as being dependent on

- what is taught
- how it is taught
- how members of the school community interact

I do not intent to refer to the aspect what is taught. It is needless to say that political culture cannot grow in isolation from content. Good curricula and textbooks are essential for civic education. But they alone can never create political culture nor can they lead to active democratic citizenship. This leads to the predominant roles teachers play in terms of political culture.

Let me therefore draw your attention to four aspects of political culture in the classroom that may particularly contribute to preparing students for democratic citizenship.

(a) Classroom climate

Above all, it is essential to create a classroom climate of trust, kindness, care and respect for persons. Where classroom climate is polluted by prejudice and fear, educational efforts are not likely to be successful. It is equally important to create an ethos of mutuality and reciprocity of rights and obligations on both sides of the classroom.
It seems to be a fatal misconception to assume that exercising a strong educational leadership means being authoritarian. Democracies have never defined themselves as "anything-goes-societies". Therefore, to foster political culture, school and classroom alike should be seen as places where students can experience rules and laws as being facilitative, protective and promotive, rather than being restrictive and punative.

(b) Classroom communication

It is essential to introduce, foster and implement a kind of classroom communication that may be described as open, cooperative, fair and, above all, content-based. Where civic education degenerates into an informal chat about this and that, it misses its goals.
Communication is the only way to solve problems, in the school and in society. Thus, teachers must do anything to enhance dialogical abilities for classroom discourse. That implies the ability and willingness to use language and technical terms adequately.
There can be no political culture without the ability to discuss and judge political issues rationally and reflectively.
Students must be encouraged to utter their opinions without fear and to consider them in the light of other opinions.
Teachers must bear in mind that they may be the only adults with whom students can discuss political questions. It would not contribute to political culture if teachers confined their roles in discussions to those of neutral moderators. Students do have the right to know what their teachers think and it is the teachers' duty to give reasons as well as to discuss them with their students.

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More often than not classroom communication seems to consist of an endless series of questions asked by the teacher and answers given by students. What we need in view of political culture are students who are able and willing to ask questions. Asking appropriate questions may tell more about a student's achievement than giving an answer. This implies that at times teachers may have to admit they do not know an answer immediatedly. I reckon it is a misconception if teachers look upon such a situation as being unpleasant because their authority might be undermined. In political issues there are rarely ready-at-hand answers.

(c) No indoctrination

Civic educators must avoid any form of indoctrination. Political culture and indoctrination are incompatible. Indoctrination may come along in many guises and in more or less subtle forms. It may even be well-intentioned at times.
But students do have a good sense of manipulation. It is the teacher's task to provide controversial materials, to introduce aspects into a discussion that may not be seen by their students. Teachers may make ingredients of political culture particularly available in situations when students and teacher share specific views unanimously. It is the teacher's duty then to introduce missing aspects of the issue at stake, even though he or she may not share the views implied.

(d) Use of learning and teaching methods

We have to bear in mind that political culture in the classroom must be learned by experience rather than by mere cognitive implementation. Therefore it is essential to make broad use of those learning and teaching methods that enhance the students' ability to work independently as well as in cooperation with others.To promote political culture students must be given the chance to learn how to learn and how to apply their skills. It is equally important to learn how to work effectively with others, how to persuade, bargain and compromise. Group work, case studies and simulation games may be seen as particularly effective methods in this contact.

Much of what has been said about the classroom can be applied to the school at large. Like in the classroom political culture in the school is highly dependent on the way the members of the school community behave, on the way they interact and communicate. Thus, every teacher should feel obliged to contribute to political culture, no matter which subject he or she may teach.

Of course, schools should provide broad chances for students to participate in decision-making processes - within the limits given. School is not just a microcosm of a democratic society . That implies that not every decision to be made in the school is to be made by means of free vote of all members of the school community. Nevertheless, students and parents alike can be involved - and they should be wherever possible. Regular institutionalized meetings of staff, parents and students could be a way to discuss questions of common interest.This is the only way to solve problems and conflicts. And it could be a good way to practice political culture.

Ladies and gentlemen: I'm convinced that teaching knowledge, skills and values that are meant to lead to democratic citizenship will provide no - or even worse - negative results unless teaching takes place in an ambience and atmosphere of democratic political culture as described above. More often than not education in school seems to suffer from a fatal incongruity between the messages delivered and the daily behaviour of those who deliver them. That can and must be avoided. We all know it is a difficult and demanding task. But it is worth the effort.

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